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STATE COMMUNICATIONS AS A BASIS FOR COUNTERING RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

Russian propaganda effectively absorbs the attention of Russian-speaking audiences in the Baltic states, reinforcing and even sacralizing narratives about Russia's position and interests in the international environment. For Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, combating propaganda and disinformation has become one of their top security priorities. Although the information threat remains relevant for each of the Baltic states, they have chosen different tools to counter propaganda (Resistance to State Propaganda in the New Information Environment p. 167). Their national strategies include a set of efforts aimed at countering direct threats of manipulation, as well as creating favorable conditions for protecting the development of information.

The Russian-language media remain a challenge to national security, as radio and television channels broadcasting in a language other than the official language reduce the mobilization of the diaspora to learn the state language and weaken its integration. Russian-speaking minorities that exist in the Russian media space feel involved in it, accept its point of view, ideology and values. This, in turn, can pose a threat to the integrity of their countries of residence. The issue of access to information for local recipients, representatives of ethnic and linguistic minorities, is often ignored in discussions about national security.

Certainly, apart from broadcasting bans, censorship and restrictions on Russian journalists, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia create an open pluralistic information environment. Media diversity and alternative sources of information are among the solutions implemented in response to information threats. They allow to check the content of communication and cover different media spaces. In addition, broadcasting in the state language pushes the Russian-speaking community out of the country's media space, which necessitates expanding the media platform by introducing public Russian-language media in countries with a significant Russian minority.

Further improvement of media literacy requires significant attention. In 2021, Estonia was ranked 3rd in the Media Literacy Index, which measures the potential of European countries to counter the negative impact of fake news and disinformation through the quality of education, free media, and high public trust, while Latvia and Lithuania were ranked only 20th and 18th, respectively, among 35 countries. Therefore, media and information literacy education is crucial.

First and foremost, new private initiatives should be encouraged, while existing ones should be supported by the state. In addition, access to independent media and news sources is necessary. As the survey in Lithuania showed, Polish and Russian ethnic groups live in the Russian cultural and information field. While the integration of ethnic groups and strengthening social cohesion remains a long-term challenge, in the medium term, ethnic groups should have access to independent news sources in their language. Language should not become a sign of division in society, but should instead be used by public and private media to provide accurate and reliable information. The language of ethnic groups can also help to recognize propaganda and information warfare instead of pushing their speakers into the information field of warring states. Hybrid threats often target the most vulnerable points of a state. Thus, maintaining a well-educated and informed society

among all ethnic groups through means acceptable to them is a fundamental step in countering hybrid threats.

In September 2015, Estonia has already launched a new channel ETV+. This is an alternative Russian-language news and entertainment channel targeting Russian-speaking minorities. The channel, which falls under the Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR), was designed to undermine the dominance of pro-Kremlin narratives in programs for Russian speakers and thus reduce Russia's influence on this audience. As several examples show, Russian-language ETV+ can not only contribute to the integration of the Russian-speaking community in Estonia, but also initiate mutual communication and foster tolerance and trust between Russians and Estonians. Moreover, research shows that Estonians also watch Russian-language television.

The Estonian leadership has taken a strong stance against Russia. The Ratas government insisted on maintaining sanctions against Russia (Schwartz A., Montfort P.). Estonia's concerns about Russia are well-founded. A 2007 dispute over Tallinn's decision to move a Soviet-era monument became a flashpoint between the two countries, leading to a series of Russian attacks. Russia's "compatriot policy," which was used to legitimize its invasions of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ukraine, still casts a shadow over Estonia, given its large ethnic Russian population. In addition, in 2018, NATO's Strategic Communications Center (StratCom) reported that Russian-language "bots" were responsible for "55 percent of all Russian-language messages about NATO in the Baltic States" and that Estonia was the most frequent target of Russian bots. Unsurprisingly, the Baltic impact of Russian hybrid warfare (a combination of political, cyber, and conventional warfare) has led countries like Estonia to seek a range of countermeasures (Schwartz A., Montfort P.).

The Estonian Defense League (EDL or *Kaitseliit*) is a key player in the country's efforts to counter propaganda. This voluntary security force, which operates under the auspices of the Ministry of Defense, has a wide range of responsibilities, including physical defense, cyber defense, and even public education on national defense. In addition to these efforts, the Estonian Defense League is more directly involved in cyber defense. In 2020, it joined public and private organizations from across Europe to participate in a cyber attack simulation. The League's activities reflect Estonia's priority of joint solutions to cyber threats. The Defense League also plays an important role in the country's fight against disinformation. It runs the anti-propaganda blog *Propastop.org*, which focuses not only on countering harmful narratives but also on highlighting corporate practices related to social media, individual disclosure, and publications aimed at furthering disinformation (Schwartz A., Montfort P.).

Estonia's response to disinformation is shaped by the country's heavy reliance on digitalization along with its large Russian population. The response is strengthened by a combination of government-sanctioned measures and volunteer efforts. For example, the country created its own Russian-language channel back in 2015 to counter Kremlin-organized messaging. This government channel allows broadcasting programs that are more neutral, but nevertheless interesting for the Russian minority in Estonia. At the same time, the country's military leadership refuses to participate in interviews with Russian media to avoid misinterpretation or manipulation of their statements. *Välisluureamet*, the country's official foreign news service, issues an annual report describing the threats Estonia faces. These efforts are commendable, but often do little to counter the flood of disinformation that spreads through social media.

To address this shortcoming, Estonia and other Baltic states have relied on mobilizing citizens to counter Russian disinformation. The so-called "Baltic Elves," a group of online activists, are working against Russian "trolls." "The Baltic Elves report on bots, monitor news message boards and counter-narratives in the Baltic states. Experts estimate that these virtual volunteers already number several thousand, and they even help *Debunk.eu*, which coordinates with the "elves" and Western foreign services to analyze more than 20,000 articles a day to identify and counter disinformation activities (Schwartz A., Montfort P.). As Ben Nimmo noted, "the best defense against disinformation is information: that is, disinformation is least effective in countries and communities that have access to a range of independent news and information sources" (Schwartz A., Montfort P.).

Estonia, like the other Baltic states, fears the Russian threat more than other countries, given its past Soviet occupation, proximity to Moscow, its digital inclination, and its large Russian minority.

Consequently, the country has a multifaceted approach to responding to these threats, but also relies heavily on multilateralism to fend off Russian hostility.

However, the main enemy of Russian propaganda remains former Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, who directly voices the truth unpleasant for the Kremlin. At the end of September 2018, Russia 1 TV channel aired a half-hour "documentary" called "The Lady of Lithuania". In half an hour, Russian propagandists managed to talk about a rally for Lithuanian independence against the EU and NATO, homosexuals (they mentioned the LGBT parade in Vilnius), a well-known conspiracy theory about a clan of pedophiles in Lithuania, "Russophobia" and emigration as proof that Lithuania is in decline. The film is notable, first of all, because it can be seen as a kind of anthology of contemporary Russian propaganda aimed at "decaying West" in general and Lithuania in particular (Sobol A.).

Similar information campaigns are unfolding both on Russian television and in social media: the Kremlin leadership questions the right of the Republic of Lithuania to exist and tries to convince the audience that the rights of the Russian-speaking population are allegedly being "oppressed" in this Baltic country. In 2017, the Lithuanian parliament passed a law restricting media content produced in Russia on Lithuanian television. According to the new law, 90 percent of Lithuanian television content must be produced in the EU and broadcast in one or more official EU languages. Although this law limits direct Russian influence on Lithuanian media, it still allows various other pro-Russian media companies registered in EU countries to broadcast their content without restrictions. In June 2018, the Lithuanian parliament adopted new amendments to the Law on Public Information, according to which TV channels in Lithuania must translate programs into Lithuanian if they are produced in Russian or other non-EU languages. The amendments are directed against Russian television products (Thomas M.).

Therefore, according to the rating of the resistance of Eastern and Central European states to Kremlin propaganda, prepared by the Ukrainian PRISM (Ukraine) and EAST Center (Poland) think tanks, Lithuania leads among the Baltic states. This is due to several factors. First, unlike Latvia and Estonia, Lithuania has few Russian-speaking residents (12%). Second, the Lithuanian information space is less sensitive to the Kremlin's propaganda channels. For example, the top 10 most popular TV channels in the country include only one channel associated with the Russian information space (First Baltic Channel), which took the last position in the rating (Sobol A.).

The study also showed that online media that disseminate ideologically biased information, such as Baltnews or the Lithuanian version of the notorious Sputnik, are also not popular in Lithuania. Lithuania also practices temporary blocking of the broadcast of Russian TV channels on cable networks in cases where it is possible to catch these channels for violating the laws of the Republic of Lithuania. The most common violations are war propaganda (especially in the context of Ukrainian events) and the use of hate speech. Recently, the local authorities have already suspended the broadcasting of four TV channels because of their propaganda threat to national security. In addition, Lithuania has proposed a program of seminars for Russian-speaking journalists to create an open, full-fledged, independent media environment in the Baltic States.

To summarize, it can be said that Lithuania has managed to form relevant structures that are now professionally engaged in the fight against Russian propaganda. At the same time, the struggle is being waged not only at the state level, but also by civil society. A key tool in the fight against pro-Russian disinformation has been teaching Lithuanian citizens how to identify and filter Moscow's propaganda products.

The main methods that the Baltic states have used to counter disinformation from Russian media include fining or suspending channels that demonstrate blatant bias. However, Latvia should reconsider this model for its solution to domestic counter-propaganda. For example, in 2014, Latvia fined PBK three times for airing fake or biased Russian news programs. The radio station "Autoradio in Rezekne" was also fined once. These fines were widely publicized, but they amounted to less than \$5,000 each, and the fine for the radio station was \$885. This tactic may seem weak and ineffective. Moderate fines do not stop channels from operating, and suspending individual channels does not stop the flow of information from newspapers, other TV and radio stations, or online sources. Moreover, these responses may simply feed into Russian government-supported narratives that

portray the Baltic states as obsessed with viewing Russians and Russian culture as a security threat (Viktorek Sarlo A.).

In 2014, Latvia also temporarily suspended the Russian TV channel RTR Planeta for incitement to war, which violates Latvian media law. Latvia provided space for the work of the independent Russian news site Meduza, founded by journalists who were fired from the Russian news site Lenta.ru for covering the war in Ukraine (Thomas M.).

In March 2016, the Latvian state body that regulates the LV domain canceled the registration of SputnikNews.lv, an affiliate of the Russian government propaganda website. These steps were strongly condemned by the Russian Foreign Ministry, and after the closure of Sputnik, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, expressed concern about the future of media freedom in Latvia. The Latvian government justified its decision by referring to both Latvian national legislation and European sanctions against the Russian Federation.

The latest step against Russian propaganda, a six-month ban on the retransmission of RTR Rossiya, was taken after Latvia's media regulator concluded that two of its programs, Evening with Vladimir Solovyov and Vesti Nedeli, violated Latvia's law on electronic media. Latvian officials argued that the statements made in V. Solovyov's program on January 18, 2016, violated Article 26 of the media law, which prohibits incitement to hatred and calls for war and military conflicts (Bergmane U.).

However, their effectiveness is limited in the Internet age. Three hours after sputniknews.lv was shut down, it returned online as sputniknews.lv.com. Meanwhile, Russia RTR programs, including Evening with Vladimir Solovyov, can also be watched online. Latvia's ban is not so much an attempt to stop the flow of information as a statement about its content. By condemning the biased nature of Russian media, the Latvian authorities reaffirmed their solidarity with the Ukrainian government and signaled to the Latvian population that information coming from Russian state media is not trustworthy. However, the question of whether this message was effective remains open. In the long run, restrictions cannot be the only answer to Russian information warfare. The possibility of creating alternative sources of information should be considered. In Latvia, the right-wing National Alliance party, which is represented in the government, opposes the creation of such a channel, as it could demotivate Russian-speaking Latvians from learning Latvian. However, despite the fact that no special channel has been created, funding for Russian-language programs in public media has increased, although their coverage is growing slowly. In January 2015, the news of the private First Baltic Channel still had two to four times more viewers than the Russian-language news of the public broadcaster (Bergmane U.).

While the ability of the Baltic public broadcasters to offer an alternative to Russian state media is unproven, the Latvian telecommunications company Lattelecom has increased its English and Russian-language news offerings, including the Russian independent TV channel Dozhd and the Ukrainian Russian-language channel Espresso TV (Bergmane U.). These efforts to provide access to a wide range of information sources should continue and be accompanied by a long-term commitment to education. Latvia's challenge is to enable citizens to make informed decisions based on critical analysis and comparison. The inclusion of media literacy in the national school curriculum would be an important step towards these goals. It should be preceded by special training programs for teachers and educators. As noted earlier, restrictions on the Russian media are more symbolic than practical. In the Internet age, the ability of democratic states to limit or control the flow of information is limited. Ultimately, choices about media preferences are made on an individual level.

Effective offensive procedures should be developed to combat media propaganda and promote democratic values. States should strive to create an open, pluralistic information environment. Such strategies should be implemented by both the public and private sectors, as well as the civil society sector, to cooperate in supplementing and sharing information. The problem of disinformation cannot be solved by politicians and civic leaders alone, but they play a key role when it comes to addressing the issue. Dealing with today's challenges should include prevention, community management, social media management, psychosocial support, and legal measures. It is important to restore trust in the media and develop professional journalism.

The openness of Western societies makes them vulnerable to information threats. However, ensuring information security should not lead to the abandonment of basic democratic rules: human

and civil rights, freedom of speech, law and order, pluralism and privacy. It was concluded that taking actions to strengthen civil society and improve communication and cooperation between society and government is important. A good example is the global network of editors (traditional and social media), media executives and journalists, which aims to better understand the types of mechanisms and identify best practices to prevent and better respond to current challenges in the information sphere. The Baltic States are under the influence of Russian multi-level and multi-narrative propaganda (Stępniewski T., p. 154). In particular, certain political phenomena, such as elections, create circumstances for Russian propaganda. They can provoke fake news campaigns, and inflammatory issues such as immigration policy are likely to be discussed. In addition, the formation of collective historical memory is an important element of Russian foreign policy.

The coordinating role of the Presidential Administration is complex and has not yet been sufficiently studied. Observing the Presidential Administration should become something of a priority for open source analysis and more high-profile methods to better understand how it works. Certain figures play a significant role in activism campaigns, whether they are officials such as Surkov, Patrushev, and Peskov or semi-autonomous actors such as Malofeev and Kiselyov. It is worth focusing less on official power brokers (who are often mostly bureaucrats and managers) and more on these "ad hoc actors." As in the case of presidential surveillance, this type of political intelligence could well fit within the competence and capabilities of the European External Action Service's Intelligence Center (INTCEN), giving it a useful role in the broader European campaign. Furthermore, given that specific curators often have specific geographical areas of interest and contacts, this is not only a challenge that requires cross-border cooperation, but also a cooperation in which smaller countries, or countries with less ambitious security services, can contribute to collective European understanding through the strengths of their home country (Galeotti M.).

For example, international efforts are targeting Russian disinformation in the Baltic States. NATO's Stratcom Center of Excellence, based in Riga, seeks to strengthen strategic communications in the Alliance, in particular by studying Russia's strategic information campaign in the Baltic States and Northern Europe. In addition to the Baltic states, the center includes Germany, Italy, Poland, and the United Kingdom (Viktorek Sarlo A.).

These efforts include studying how controversial historical events-especially pro-Russian narratives surrounding World War II and the Soviet takeover of the Baltic states-are interpreted in the Russian media. It also monitors issues such as online trolling by bots and develops methods to counter hostile influence. Because recent research on countering disinformation shows that it is difficult to throw out false facts and biased narratives. In fact, people tend to be quite resistant to attempts to fight their preconceived notions. For example, one study showed that correcting misinformation often does not change beliefs. This is due to an inherent cognitive bias: people tend to seek out information that confirms their beliefs and find this information more persuasive and reliable than information that does not confirm their beliefs. In addition, people remember information better when it coincides with their preconceptions and are highly motivated to eliminate the discrepancy in order to maintain their views.

It should be noted that mechanisms for promoting regional cooperation in the Baltic States were established in the 1990s – at the inter-parliamentary level with the Baltic Assembly and at the intergovernmental level with the Baltic Council of Ministers. They are functioning successfully and provide a framework for more tangible Baltic cooperation. Moreover, Baltic cooperation takes place within the framework of other regional and international structures, including the North Baltic Eight (NB8), Baltic-Polish relations, the Three Seas Initiative framework, and, of course, NATO and the EU. In May 2016, at a joint conference of the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers, the Baltic states adopted a resolution on the pressing issue of strategic communications, expressing their full support for NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga and the EU's Eastern Partnership Strategic Communications Command in Brussels. The Baltic governments also reaffirmed their readiness to work together to promote quality media in the Baltic States, as well as to cooperate in developing media literacy and supporting the Baltic Media Center of Excellence in Riga (Thomas M.).

During its annual sessions, the Baltic Assembly regularly mentions the issues of strategic communications, disinformation and societal resilience. Resolutions of the Baltic Assembly in 2014 and 2017 pointed to the importance of Baltic cooperation in strategic communication activities; in 2018, the Baltic Assembly's Security and Defense Committee named strategic communications among its priority areas of activity. On the other hand, the Baltic states can sincerely boast of extensive experience in countering (obstructing) hostile soft power activities at the national level (Thomas M.).

The Baltic States also approach the topic of information warfare within the framework of the North Baltic Cooperation Format. On May 6, 2015, the Baltic Foreign Ministers (NB8) discussed the ongoing broad campaign of biased coverage in the Russian media, in particular regarding the crisis in Ukraine. The NB8 meeting was aimed at identifying common approaches to countering disinformation and supporting free media. In 2017, the Nordic Council finalized its program to support media content and strengthen media production in minority languages in the Baltic States; the program included specific technical assistance to media producers, media information exchange, training for young journalists, direct financial assistance to ETV+ and several Latvian radio stations in Russian (Thomas M.).

In July 2018, the Baltic States established the Baltic Cultural Fund to finance cultural cooperation programs in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, as well as to organize joint cultural events. The Fund will finance professional projects in the fields of architecture, fine arts, design, literature, music, theater, libraries, museums, and archives. The Fund is an example of practical measures to build the cultural identity of the region in order to promote the activation of civil society through patriotic events. In turn, such events evoke a greater emotional connection with their country among the public, theoretically contributing to making citizens of the Baltic states less vulnerable to Russian narratives aimed at inciting dissent (Thomas M.).

At the same time, Russian propaganda in the Baltic states is much more effective due to the large Russian-speaking audience. Russian propaganda in the region is characterized by a focus on undermining relations between the country and its neighbors. To increase effectiveness, the media message is accompanied by virtual supporters. There are proven diplomatic, economic, organizational and financial ties between institutions, businesses and politicians in Russia and the Baltic states. Several far-right and extremist parties spread pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives that polarize their respective societies. Although they claim to be defenders of national interests, in reality they act more as defenders of Russian policies (Wagnsson C., Hellman M.).

So far, several attempts have been made to deal with the problem of propaganda in the non-governmental sector, both at the national and regional levels. In the fight against propaganda, independent think tanks, NGOs, and civil society activists support legal remedies of the national government. Other activities in the non-governmental sector include seminars, roundtables, and meetings on asymmetric threats to information security actors. Undoubtedly, strategic communication between officials (at the state level), experts, NGOs and the community should be strengthened to build social capacity and resilience. Several events should be organized to strengthen this cooperation in training and education. The lack of critical thinking, along with the combination of socio-political populism and pro-Russian business ties in the Baltic States, increases their vulnerability to risks in many areas, not just information security (Hornik R.).

Thus, in general, the Baltic countries' counter-propaganda actions are focused on: effective communication and promotion of national values; strengthening the independent media sector and civil society organizations; raising public awareness of information manipulation, disinformation and falsification; fining or suspending Russian channels that demonstrate blatant bias.

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Анотація

Корнат Л. Я., Сенчакевич Н. Державна інформаційна політика як основа протидії російській пропаганді. – Стаття.

Країни Балтії – Литва, Латвія та Естонія – стоять перед викликом боротьби з російською пропагандою та дезінформацією, оскільки російськомовні ЗМІ залишаються викликом національній безпеці.

Ця стаття зосереджується на зусиллях країн Балтії у боротьбі з проросійською пропагандою. Крім того, ми обговорюємо деякі виклики, з якими стикаються Литва та Естонія у протидії російській пропаганді.

Російська пропаганда ефективно поглинає увагу російськомовної аудиторії в країнах Балтії. Тому з'ясування національної стратегії країн Балтії щодо протидії російській дезінформаційній стратегії та всебічне дослідження політики і заходів є актуальним для формулювання рекомендацій щодо вдосконалення глобальної політики захисту від російської пропаганди щодо російськомовних меншин.

Досліджено методи та засоби, які використовують країни Балтії для протидії дезінформації. Проаналізовано використання заборон на мовлення, цензури та обмежень щодо російських журналістів. Литва, Латвія та Естонія створили відкрите плюралістичне інформаційне середовище, яке підтримують державні та приватні гравці (Ліга захисту Естонії та антипропагандистський блог Propastop.org, а також групи інтернет-активістів, які працюють проти російських "тролів"). У червні 2018 року литовський парламент ухвалив нові поправки до Закону про публічну інформацію, які сприяють використанню литовської мови, а також просуванню програм семінарів для російськомовних громадян. У 2021 році країни Балтії посіли високі місця в рейтингу країн, які успішно протистояли негативному впливу фейкових новин завдяки якості освіти, вільним медіа та високому рівню довіри населення.

Підсумовано, що для підвищення ефективності антипропагандистських інформаційних кампаній необхідна транскордонна співпраця з національними партнерами, а також з міжнародними організаціями, такими як Центр передового досвіду НАТО Stratcom, що базується в Ризі, який прагне зміцнити стратегічні комунікації в Альянсі, зокрема, шляхом вивчення стратегічної інформаційної кампанії Росії в країнах Балтії та Північної Європи.

Ключові слова: Литва, країни Балтії, Латвія, Естонія, національна безпека, російська пропаганда, інформаційна політика.

Summary

Kornat L. Ya., Senchakevych N. State communications as a basis for countering Russian propaganda. – Article.

The Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, are facing the challenge of combating Russian propaganda and disinformation, as the Russian-language media remain a challenge to national security. This paper focuses on Baltic states' efforts to combat pro-Russian propaganda. In addition, we discuss some of the challenges faced by Lithuania and Estonia to counter Russian propaganda.

Russian propaganda effectively absorbs the attention of Russian-speaking audiences in the Baltic States. Therefore, clarifying the Baltic national strategy to counter the Russian disinformation strategy and establishing a comprehensive study of the policies and measures is relevant for the formulation of recommendations to improve the global policy of protection against Russian propaganda towards Russian-speaking minorities.

The methods and means used by Baltic States to counter disinformation were studied. The use of broadcasting bans, censorship and restrictions on Russian journalists have been analyzed. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have created an open pluralistic information environment, supported by public and private players (Estonian Defense League for Estonia and anti-propaganda blog Propastop.org and groups of online activists working against Russian "trolls.") In June 2018, the Lithuanian parliament adopted new amendments to the Law on Public Information to favor the use of Lithuanian language, as well as promoting programs of seminars for Russian-speaking journalists to create an open, full-fledged, independent media environment. In 2021, Baltic States were high ranked as countries which have successfully countered the negative impact of fake news, through the quality of education, free media and high public trust.

It is concluded that in order to increase the effectiveness of anti-propaganda information campaigns, cross-border cooperation with national partners as well as international partners, such as the Riga-based NATO Stratcom Center of Excellence, which seeks to strengthen strategic communications in the Alliance, in particular by studying Russia's strategic information campaign in the Baltic States and Northern Europe, is necessary.

Key words: Lithuania, Baltic States, Latvia, Estonia, national security, Russian propaganda, state communication.